

ORGANIZATION NEWS

Information/Education Page

Force of Peer Mentorship for Persons With Spinal Cord Injury



Peers share similar work, family, travel, disease, injury, and life experiences. People gain valuable insights from making connections with others who have “been there, done that.”

What is a peer mentor?

A peer mentor is someone who has already navigated through life with spinal cord injury (SCI). The peer mentor can serve as a guide, a sounding board, and a source of support for others with SCI.

What can a peer mentor do for you?

Model

Peers show how to live successful and fulfilled lives while managing issues that come with SCI, including using a wheelchair and changes in bowel, bladder, and sexual function. They can demonstrate skills such as getting back in your wheelchair from the floor or overcoming obstacles in navigating city streets in a wheelchair. Peers can model ways to manage your health, well-being, and daily living needs as new situations or challenges arise. They even can help you manage the health care bureaucracy.

Everything is different after SCI

Mobility, bowel and bladder function, sexuality, skin ... There is little that does not change after SCI!

Clinicians provide medical advice, but peers have lived the SCI experience and can provide valuable experience-based information to help others learn to adapt to the new normal in daily living, and adapt to new challenges that arise over time.

Share

Peers share personal experiences, successes, frustrations, and even failures. This sharing creates a sense of support and fosters a spirit of community where peers discuss and listen to each other's personal concerns and help each other develop and improve problem-solving skills. Peers offer tips they have found helpful in preventing problems such as bladder infections and skin sores.

Offer emotional support

When it is difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel or to envision what is possible after injury, peers can present a vision of that future. Peers have first-hand experience in dealing with emotional issues associated with an SCI and can share life stories about developing and maintaining intimate personal relations, parenting, going back to school or work, and so forth, and can become important resources for understanding how to navigate new challenges.

Build community

Peers build networks of support in local communities, face-to-face, and via social media. Opportunities for interacting with others who are living successfully with SCI provide effective venues to share experiences.

Can peer mentorship add value to SCI rehabilitation?

What patients say:

- “It really helped having someone understand what I was going through.”
- “Peers are people I can relate to and they encourage engagement in rehab activities.”
- “Peers provide great examples of real-life scenarios.”
- “It was so valuable for me to learn tips and tricks to make my life easier.”

What research says:

- Peer support boosts confidence in managing SCI issues.¹
- Peer support reduces hospital readmissions after rehabilitation discharge.¹
- Peer support helps people get more involved in managing their own health, be satisfied with life, and participate in their community.²

How can you find peer support networks?

- Inquire about formal and informal peer support programs at your local rehabilitation hospital.
- Search the Internet for SCI organizations. Here are some organizations that connect persons with a mentor within their local area, or provide remote support to share real-life stories of how peers address challenges associated with SCI:
 - Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation (available at: www.christopherreeve.org/get-support/get-a-peer-mentor).
 - FacingDisability.com (available at: <https://facingdisability.com/peer-counseling>).
 - United Spinal Association (available at: www.spinalcord.org/chapters/directory/).
 - Paralyzed Veterans of America (available at: www.pva.org/find-support/veterans-assistance).
 - Centers for Independent Living (they have a longstanding history of peer support within the disability community itself: search by state to find your local Centers for Independent Living at: www.acl.gov/programs/aging-and-disability-networks/centers-independent-living).
- Use the search function on social media—multiple Facebook accounts and YouTube channels exist that originate from an SCI-related source and are open to all.

Authorship

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References

1. Gassaway J, Jones M, Sweatman M, Hong M, Anziano P, DeVault K. Effects of peer mentoring on self-efficacy and hospital readmission following inpatient rehabilitation of individuals with spinal cord injury: a randomized controlled trial. *Arch Phys Med Rehabil* 2017;98:1526-34.
2. Houlihan B, Everhart-Skeels S, Gutnick D, et al. Empowering adults with chronic spinal cord injury to prevent secondary conditions. *Arch Phys Med Rehabil* 2016;97:1687-95.